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Pentagon Is Resolved To Keep Its Secrets, If Not Its Budgets

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Probing Leak About Red Ink, It Gives Lie-Detector Test To Brass and Stirs a Row

By JOHN J. FIALKA
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—"Are you comfortable?"

The questioner wants to make sure that the harness he has put around your chest to measure variations in your breathing is not too tight. The cuff placed on your arm to measure blood-pressure fluctuations should not pinch. The little sensors connected to the fingertips of both hands to detect perspiration should fit properly. The questioner wants you to be perfectly relaxed before he hits you with the question:

"Have you ever given unauthorized information to a reporter?"

At least 15 of the nation's top defense officials have had to undergo variations of this lie-detector test in recent weeks. It is part of the Reagan administration's campaign to stop leaks, the most ambitious effort in recent years to control the flow of information that is considered "sensitive." The current crackdown follows a published report of internal Pentagon estimates that future defense outlays could run far higher than official figures show.

The list of those whose integrity has been probed by lie detector thus far includes: the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the deputy secretary of defense, the two under secretaries and a half dozen assistant secretaries, and the secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force.

Polygraphous Perversion?

All of them, according to the Pentagon, "volunteered" for their session with the polygraph machine. But privately, some of them are outraged and others admit to having been profoundly discomfited by the experience, partly because they feel the leak that provoked it was, as one puts it, "not a big deal."

It has become, however, a very big deal to John C. F. Tillson IV, director of manpower management in the office of the assistant secretary for management. After flunking three separate lie-detector tests, he stands accused of "disclosure of official information to unauthorized persons." He may lose his job.

The leak has also become a big deal to George Wilson, veteran defense reporter at the Washington Post, which printed some of the official information Mr. Tillson is accused of spilling.

"An honorable man stands falsely accused," is the way Mr. Wilson put it in a letter to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. ". . . I give you my word, John was in no way connected with the story I gathered and wrote."

William Howard Taft IV, the Defense Department's general counsel, won't say what he thinks of the Tillson case. "We don't talk about investigations that are ongoing," explains Mr. Taft, a great-grandson of the former President.

An Old Problem

Mr. Taft does say, however, that one of the Pentagon's concerns is "premature release of information that debilitates the decision-making process." That, he agrees, covers a lot of ground, including working papers that don't have a security classification.

The Pentagon's leak problem is as old as the building (completed in 1943). And although dozens of leak investigations have been ordered in recent years, Pentagon spokesmen say that they can't immediately recall one that resulted in somebody's being punished. As the anatomy of the Tillson case shows, these things aren't easy to deal with.

The current investigation centers on the Defense Resources Board, a group of about 30 high-level officials headed by Frank Carlucci, the deputy secretary of Defense. Its job is to manage the defense budget, and on Jan. 7 it was treated to a slide presentation on a very sensitive aspect of that role: the amount of money the Pentagon might have to ask Congress for over the next five years.

The official estimate of the Reagan administration was $1.5 trillion. But the board's members were told that the actual costs for what the military services wanted could overshoot that mark by as much as $750 billion.

According to one participant in the meeting, Mr. Carlucci "made earnest pleas" to those present not to disclose the higher spending estimate. Mr. Carlucci, this official says, was "upset about recent procurement decisions that had gotten to defense contractors at very high speed. The officials who made them had no sooner gotten back to their desks when they started getting calls from Congressmen."

Despite the Carlucci warning, the board's deliberations also leaked with very high speed. Mr. Wilson disclosed the numbers, along with whole paragraphs from the text of the slide presentation, in the following day's Post. The article said the meeting pro-

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